

Message Text

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ACTION AID-59

INFO OCT-01 NEA-06 ISO-00 SS-15 SP-02 L-02 H-01 NSC-05

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R 270910Z NOV 74

FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5437

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 NEW DELHI 15882

FOLLOWING TEL SENT ACTION NEW DELHI INFO BOMBAY MADRAS
ON NOV 26. NOW REPEATED FOR YOUR INFO.

QUOTE

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE CALCUTTA 2508

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: EAGR, IN

SUBJ: COOCH BEHAR AND OTHER NATURAL DISASTERS

1. SUMMARY. THE AUTHORITIES SAY 300,000 PEOPLE ARE DEPENDENT
ON FREE FOOD RELIEF IN COOCH BEHAR BECAUSE OF FLOOD DAMAGE.
ANOTHER 200,000 ARE SIMILARLY DEPENDENT BECAUSE OF THE GREATLY
ENHANCED IMBALANCE BETWEEN FOOD PRICES AND WAGES FOR AGRICUL-
TURAL LABOR. THE TOTAL NUMBER ON FREE FOOD RELIEF IN WEST BENGAL
IS OVER 2.5 MILLION. THIS WILL DECLINE REPIDLY NOW THAT
WORK IS AVAILABLE IN THE WINTER HARVEST, BUT THE SAME BASIC
SITUATION SEEMS CERTAIN TO ARISE AGAIN NEXT YEAR. IT APPEARS
THAT WEST BENGAL WILL HAVE A CONTINGENCY FUND OF \$18 MILLION
FOR "FOOD-FOR-WORK" IN ORDER TO MEET IT. AGRICULTURAL

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DEVELOPMENT PLANS TO CORRECT THE SITUATION ARE RECEIVING

PRIORITY BUT WILL HAVE AT BEST MEDIUM-TERM IMPACT. END SUMMARY.

2. COOCH BEHAR DOESN'T MAKE MUCH OF A VISUAL IMPACT--
A REASONABLY FERTILE-LOOKING COUNTRYSIDE, AN UNUSUALLY SQUALID
DISTRICT TOWN WITH A CRUMBLING EUROPEAN-STYLE PALACE OF THE
MAHARAJA AS ITS PIECE DE RESISTANCE, AN UNIMPRESSIVE SYMBOL
ARM A NONE-TOO-RELEVANT PAST.

3. THERE ARE SOME SALIENT STATISTICAL FEATURES. THEKO
POPULATION OF THE DISTRICT, SWELLED BY THE REFUGEE GLOW FROM
NEIGHBORING DISTRICTS OF WHAT WAS THEN EAST PAKISTAN, MORE
HAN DOUBLED BETWEEN 1951 AND 1971 (GOING FROM ABOUT 650,000
TO 1.4 MILLION). ALMOST HALF OF THE QOPULATION IYUADE UP OF
SCHEDULED CASTES. ABOUT ONE-FOURTH OF THOSE EMPLOYED IN
AGRICULTURAL ARE LANDLESS, AND VASTLY MORE PRODUCE LEEJ THAN
ENOUGH FOR SUBSISTENCEPNN THEIR TINY HOLDINGS. ALTHOUGH
AVERAGE LAND-HOLDINGS (2.5 ACRES PER CULTIVATOR) ARE HIGHER
THAN THE STATE AVERAGE, PER ACRE YIELDS ARE LOW. ONLY A SMALL
PERCENTAGE OF THE LAND IS IRRIGATED AND ONE CROP PER YEAR
(RICE OR JUTE) IS THE BUSUAL PATTERN.

4. THEN THERE ARE THE FLOODS. OF THE SEVERAL GREAT RIVERS
FLOWING FHTOUGH COOCH BEHAR ENROUTE FROM THE HIMALAYAS TO THE
BHAHMAPUTRA, THREE, INCLUDING TWO OF THE LARGEST (TORSAL
AND JALDHAKA), GOT OUT OF THEIR EMBANKMENTS THIS YEAR.
HOUSES DESTROYED, FIELDS WASHED AWAY OR COVERED WITH SILT,
ROADS CUT, BRIDGES WASHED OUT, 300,000 PEOPLE MADE DEPENDENT
ON GRUEL KITCHENS FOR THEIR DAILY FOOD. 35 CRORES OF RUPEES
(\$4.2 MILLION) WILL BE REQUIRED TO RESTORE DAMAGE DONE BY
FLOODS IN WEST BENGAL THIS HAUR, NOT RPT NOT INCLUDING FOOD
RELIEF.

5. CONDITIONS AMONG THE TDMELESS ARE BAD. THEY DON'T HAVE THE
HOPELESSLY EMACIATED LOOK OF THE PURULIA VILLAGERS (CALCUTTA
1976), BUT THEY ARE COMPLETELY DESTITUTE AND HELPLESS. WE
CAME UPON ONE LARGE CAMP WHERE A LONG SECTION OF BLACK-TOP
ROAD, SEVERED BY A NEWLY-CARVED CHANNEL OF THE TORSAL, HAS BEEN
CONVERTED INTO ONE LARGE FOUNDATION FOR COUNTLESS TINY
MAKE-SHIFT SHELTERS OF BAMBOO, TENTCLOTH, WHAT HAVE YOU.
THE PREDOMINANCE OF WOMEN, OLD PEOPLE, AND-JLABMSE ALL CHIL-
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DREN, IS STRIKING. THE YOUNG MEN MAY HAVE GONE OFF
TEMPORARILY TO SEEK WORK IN THE RICE HUVOWEH JUST BEGINNING.
BUT, AS IN SIMILAR SITUATIONS IN GOALPURA DISTRICT OF ASSAM,
THE SUSPICION GROWS THAT MANY O HTHESE HELPLESS PEOHHE HAVE
BEEN ABANDONED BY THE EMPLOYABLE MEMBER OR MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY,
LEAVING THEM AS MORE-OR-LESS PERMANENT WARDS OF THE STATE.
THE CAMP AREA INCLUDES A STRUCTURE OF BAMBOO, WITHOUT
WALLS BUT COVERED WITH A TARPULIN, WHERE GRAIN IS STORED

AND MADE INTO THE DAILY MEAL OF GRUEL DOLED OUT TO THESE UNFORTUNATES. THIS RELIEF WILL HAVE TO CONTINUE FOR SEVERAL MONTHS, HAPPILY, UNICDP WILL HELP.

6. AS OFTEN HAPPENS, THE RAINS THAT HELPED DESTROY THE LIVELIHOOD OF THESE PEOPLE INSURED A GOOD YEAR FOR THEIR NEARBY NEIGHBORS--THE OUTLOOK IS FOR A RECORD RICE HARVEST OF OVER 200,000 TONS.

AND HARVESTING IT WILL PROVIDE WORK AND WAGES TO MANY LABORERS NOW ON RELIEF. FOR IN ADDITION TO THE FLOOD VICTIMS, PROBABLY ANOTHER 200,000 PEOPLE IN COOCH BEHAR (FOR A TOTAL EXCEEDING ONE THIRD OF THE POPULATION) ARE BEING SAVED FROM STARVATION BY THE DAILY VISIT OF MOBILE GRUEL KITCHENS TO FIELD LOCATIONS. (I SUSPECT IN FACT THAT THE NUMBER OF "FLOOD VICTIMS" IS INFLATED FOR VARIOUS REASONS RELATING TO ACCESS TO ASSISTANCE FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND INTERNATIONALLY, AND THAT MANY OF THE 300,000 ARE SIMPLY DESTITUTE LANDLESS LABORERS AND THEIR DEPENDENTS.) A FAMILIAR SIGHT ALONG THE ROADS IS THE FLATBED TRUCK CARRYING OPEN-TOPPED 55-GALLON UMS FILLED WITH THE YELLOWISH STUFF, WHICH CIVIL SERVANTS DIP OUT BY THE BUCKETFUL AND LADLE INTO THE CITIZENS' CONTAINERS, EACH CITIZEN OF COURSE BEARING A CARD ENTITLING HIM TO THIS SERVICE, EACH TRANSACTION BEING DULY RECORDED.

7. THIS IS THE SCARY PART. THE FLOODS MAY OR MAY NOT COME AGAIN. BUT THE SITUATION WHICH THIS YEAR REDUCED HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE TO DEPENDENCE ON THE DOLE WILL. NOBODY DOUBTS IT. REAL WAGES FOR THESE TOO-NUMEROUS LABORERS CONTINUE TO FALL AS PAYMENT IN KIND IS STEADILY REPLACED BY PAYMENT IN CASH. IN COOCH BEHAR AND OTHER JUTE-GROWING DISTRICTS, EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ARE DECLINING AS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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FARMERS SHIFT OUT OF JUTE AND INTO RICE WHICH REQUIRES MUCH LESS LABOR.

8. SINCE THIS IS TO A LARGE DEGREE A STATE-WIDE PROBLEM (AND REGION-WIDE; EVEN ALL-INDIA?), I HAVE DISCUSSED IT SINCE MY RETURN FROM NORTHERN WEST BENGAL WITH THE GOVERNOR, MINISTER OF FINANCE, CHIEF SECRETARY, AND MEMBERS OF THE STATE PLANNING BOARD. THEY ARE UNIFORMLY APPALLED AT THE FACT THAT OVER 10 MILLION PEOPLE IN WEST BENGAL ARE DEPENDENT FOR THEIR LIVES ON FREE FOOD DISPENSED BY THE GOVERNMENT; THAT THIS HAS ALREADY COST 15 CRORES (\$18 MILLION) ABOVE AND BEYOND THE AMOUNT ORIGINALLY BUDGETED FOR RELIEF, AND WILL ALMOST CERTAINLY COST ANOTHER 5 CRORES (\$6 MILLION) BEFORE THE GRUEL KITCHENS CAN BE CLOSED; AND, ABOVE ALL, THAT IT IS ALL GOING

TO HAPPEN AGAIN NEXT YEAR. WAGES ARE NOT GOING TO GO UP,
EMPLOYMENT AMONT THESE PEOPLE IS NOT GOING TO GO UP, AND
PRICES ARE NOT GOING TO COME DOWN, AT LEAST NOT ENOUGH TO
PREVENT THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THIS SYNDROME,PROBABLY BY
NEXT SEPTEMBER AT THE LATEST.

9. WHAT DO YOU DO? EVERYONE AGREES THAT THE ANSWER LIES IN
DOUBLE AND TRIPLE CROPPING (TWO RICE CROPS, ONE WHEAT CROP)
IN PLACE OF THE SINGLE CROPPING PATTERN THAT PREVAILS ON TWO
THIRDS OF THE ARABLE LAND IN THIS STATE. PRODUCTION SOARS,
FOOD PRICES GO DOWN, FARM EMPLOYMENT IS MULTIPLIED, FARM
WAGES GO UP, GRUEL KITCHENS BECOME A THING OF THE PAST.

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ACTION AID-59

INFO OCT-01 NEA-06 ISO-00 SS-15 SP-02 L-02 H-01 NSC-05

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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5438

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10. IT ISN'T JUST TALK, BUT IT MAY NOT WORK AND AT BEST IT
WILL TAKE TIME--OPTIMISTS SAY TWO TO THREE YARES--
BEFORE IT BEGINS TO MAKE ITSELF FELT. THE BASIC PROJECT
(COMPREHENSIVE AREA DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM--CADP) IS AT LAST
UNDERWAY, WITH 19 AREAS (AT LEAST ONE IN EACH DISTRICT)
COVERING 20,000 AREAS SLATED TO BE BROUGHT INTO THE 20TH
CENTURY THROUGH IRRIGATION, FERTILIZER, INSECTICIDES, HYV'S,
CONSOLIDATION OF TOO-SMALL PLOTS, ETC., DURING THE CURRENT FIS-
CAL YEAR. THE TECHNOLOGY IS THERE--ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS APPLY

IT. THE OPTIMISTS SAY THAT WHEN THIS THING GETS ROLLING THE BANKS WILL ACCEPT IS COMMERCIAL FEASIBILITY AND THE GOVERNMENTAL ROLE WILL DECLINE WHILE THE CONCEPT SPREADS RAPIDLY THROUGHOUT THE STATE. THE PESSIMISTS SAY THAT THE RURAL ELITE WILL SEE IN THIS A THREAT TO THEIR RELATIVE POSITION IN THE COUNTRYSIDE AND WILL SABOTAGE IT WITH THE SAME EFFICIENCY THAT THEY HAVE SHOWN IN SABOTAGING THE STATE'S GRAIN PROCUREMENT EFFORTS. ADDITIONALLY, THEY CALL ATTENTION TO THE FACT THAT MOST IRRIGATION SCHEMES DEPEND ON POWER, AND CLAIM THAT POWER AVAILABILITY WILL PUT A LOW CEILING ON CADP ACHIEVEMENT. NEVERTHELESS, THE WORLD BANK IS INTERESTED. THE STATE LEADERSHIPS CURRENTLY IMPRESSED WITH THE URGENCY OF LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE PROBLEM, BUT IT WILL BE DIFFICULT TO KEEP MOMENTUM BEHIND IT ONCE THE HARVEST IS IN FULL SWING AND THE GRUEL KITCHENS SHUT DOWN.

11. THE MINISTER OF FINANCE IS DETERMINED NOT TO LET THE ENORMOUS RELIEF TAB PREVENT THE EXECUTION OF THE VERY PLAN THAT COULD IN TIME OBTAIN THE NEED FOR RELIEF. HE IS TRYING TO FOCUS THE CUTS ON NON-PLAN EXPENDITURE, SPEED UP RECOVERY OF LOANS, FIND MORE REVENUES, INCREASE COLLECTION OF SMALL SAVINGS (A SURPRISINGLY FERTILE SOURCE OF DEVELOPMENT MONEY IN WEST BENGAL), AND (OF COURSE) TRY TO GET MORE MONEY FROM THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT.

12. NO MATTER WHAT MAY COME OF ALL THIS IN THE MEDIUM TERM, IT IS UNLIKELY TO HAVE ANY SIGNIFICANT IMPACT NEXT YEAR. THUS THE ADMINISTRATORS ARE GEARING UP A PROGRAM OF FOOD-FOR-WORK THAT WOULD AT LEAST PROVIDE SOME RETURN FOR THE OUTLAYS. THEIR ESTIMATE THAT THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM WILL RIVAL THAT OF THIS YEAR EMERGES FROM THE SIZE OF THE CONTINGENCY FUND BEING SET ASIDE FOR THIS PURPOSE -- 15 CRORES (\$18 MILLION).
PICKERING UNQUOTE
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Message Attributes

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